

FESTIVE PIETY: STAGING FOOD AND DRINK AT CHESTER

Matthew Sergi

In the act of eating one is connecting oneself with the world.

Anna Meigs 'Food as a Cultural Construction'¹

Ten of the twenty-five Chester Cycle plays feature eating, drinking, or something closely associated with eating or drinking (like an alewife) at the centre of the action.² Over the three performance days of Whitsun week, then, these ten plays required guild players to display and use a series of food-related items at four stations through Chester's main streets.³ Any biblical cycle must include food in some of its most important episodes: Eve will eat the apple, Christ will break bread. But the Chester Cycle's non-biblical scenes and embellishments, particularly the interpolations that do not appear in other medieval adaptations of the Bible, also tend to involve the consumption or exchange of comestibles. Outside of the ten 'food and drink plays' I have listed in TABLE 1, the Cycle contains multiple gestures toward offstage food and drink, dialogues about eating or hospitality, and extended food-based metaphors.⁴ However, because my discussion here will primarily concern *public staging*, I will limit my scope to those cases in which the extant play text necessarily calls for a visible food-related prop or character.

I do not wish to make a unifying case that the entirety of the Chester Cycle is fixated on or organized around feasting, though the thematic and literal presence of food and drink throughout the plays is remarkable. What concern me here are the resonances between the feasting staged by the Chester players and the unscripted festivity that surrounded them before, during, and after performances. The play texts reveal the marks and traces of this festivity, which function as a kind of fossilized record of Cestrian festive practice — a record that not only illuminates Cestrian culture, but also is essential to the understanding of the extant form and content of the plays. After a thorough examination of public feasting both inside and outside the performances, I will demonstrate that the Cycle's use of food and drink is not always necessarily a function of the Eucharistic feast, whether as type or antitype. In contrast with the York Cycle, for